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Access Details: [subscription number 768320842]
Publisher: Informa Healthcare
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Mental Health

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713432595>

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First Published on: 13 November 2007

To cite this Article: Russell, Tamara A. (2007) 'Kundalini Yoga Meditation (KYM): Techniques specific for psychiatric disorders, couples therapy and personal growth', Journal of Mental Health, 17:2, 221 - 222

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09638230701677829

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09638230701677829>

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BOOK REVIEW

Kundalini Yoga Meditation (KYM): Techniques specific for psychiatric disorders, couples therapy and personal growth

David S. Shannahoff-Skalsa

New York: Norton Press, 2007

304 pp., £25/\$39.95 hdbk

ISBN 978-0-393-70475-4

A rise in interest in non-pharmacological interventions for psychiatric conditions has spawned burgeoning specialties in areas that might previously have come under the umbrella term of “alternative” therapies. For example, recent work has explored the mental health benefits of meditation, and mindfulness-based psychological therapies are experiencing a period of growth and acceptance within clinical practice. In part, the interest in these approaches relates to their emphasis on preventative mental health, as well as cost-effectiveness. In this book David S. Shannahoff-Skalsa provides a comprehensive account of how Kundalini Yoga Meditation [KYM] techniques can be used to alleviate a number of common psychiatric complaints. The first chapter provides the fascinating relevant background to the key technique of unilateral nostril breathing. Nostril dominance fluctuates during the day and is linked to our sleep/wake cycle. Chapter 1 reports EEG and MEG studies showing that (as with meditation) this breathing pattern engages the frontal lobes. Using unilateral breathing, the contralateral frontal cerebral hemisphere is stimulated. Via the hypothalamus, the ipsilateral sympathetic nervous system is also engaged (hence mind-body medicine). Using these techniques, physical *and* mental health benefits are attainable. Shannahoff-Skalsa’s excellent volume details how different KYM sets can be used clinically. The sets are laid out in an easy-to-follow format with photographs illustrating the correct postures. Chapters cover Anxiety Disorders; Major Depressive and Bipolar Disorders; Addictive, Impulse Control and Eating Disorders; Sleep Disorders; Chronic Fatigue Syndrome; ADHD; the Abused and Battered Psyche, with a smaller section on Couples therapy. Each chapter provides a brief background to the disorders under consideration, as well as detailing specific sets of breathing and postures. It should be noted that many sets are used across disorders, including “Tuning In” (allowing time to become more relaxed and reach a meditative state), and a number of techniques for “Reducing Anxiety Stress and Tension”. There are also disorder-specific sets such as the “Technique for Treating OCD” and “Meditation for treating Grief”. References are cited for a small number of empirical studies evaluating these techniques. Some particularly encouraging results are described for the treatment of OCD. The impact of this book however, comes from the illuminating case histories and testimonials. Many are from individuals who might be considered victims of current pharmacological practice, those considered very severe, and, in some cases “untreatable”. A constant across all successful use of KYM was the commitment to practice by the individual. The group format is recommended (but not essential) as competition between group members can provide motivation, and groups also provide a space to discuss how the techniques are affecting each individual. Two final chapters detail the ways in which KYM can be integrated into current practice. KYM requires the therapist not only to have their own practice but also to engage in practice with

the clients (to reduce self-consciousness and allow a first-hand account from the therapist as to the procedure and benefits).

A fascinating book, leading the way in integrated mind-body treatments, in an easy-to-read and understand format. One drawback noted by Yogi Bhaian, the man who brought his study of this ancient technique to the West in the 1960s is that “it may be as many as 500 years before . . . medical science will understand the effects of this kind of meditation well enough to delineate all of its parameters in measurable factors”. The neuroanatomical correlates are beginning to be evaluated, and reliable patterns of frontal lobe engagement during both meditation and mindfulness suggests a promising avenue not to be ignored.

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